

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF TRAVELLERS: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TRAVEL TEXTS IN THE REGION OF LASITHI

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Abstract

Travel texts constitute a significant source of cultural memory and identity, as they capture the image of a place through the narratives of foreign travellers. In the case of Lasithi, these texts provide not only historical and geographical references but also opportunities for their integration into strategies of sustainable tourism development.

This paper focuses on the wider areas of Ierapetra and Sitia, places with a rich natural and cultural heritage but also particular challenges related to sustainable development. The aim is to explore how travel texts can be incorporated into local development strategies, strengthening cultural resilience and promoting forms of tourism based on authenticity and locality.

As a case study, two thematic routes were designed on the basis of references in travel texts, highlighting landscapes, monuments and cultural practices of the area. The research component is based on a quantitative survey (N=108), which examined visitors' willingness to combine their holidays with visits to sites included in these routes. The results were encouraging, as the majority of participants expressed positive attitudes, underscoring the potential of travel literature as a driver of local development.

The findings demonstrate that the integration of travel texts into cultural and tourism policies can contribute to cultural interpretation, the reinforcement of local identity and the sustainable tourism development of Lasithi, offering an innovative perspective for the region's strategic promotion.

Key words: *travel texts, sustainable development, cultural resilience, Lasithi, thematic routes*

1. SUSTAINABILITY AS A STARTING POINT FOR THE CREATION OF CULTURAL ROUTES

Sustainability has become a fundamental starting point for contemporary tourism, as it brings together the environment, the economy and society through the cultural dimension of development. Cultural sustainability is now recognised as the fourth pillar of sustainable development, since the protection and activation of culture are essential for preserving identity and social cohesion (Terkenli & Georgoula, 2022). As Mitoula (2002) notes, the European approach to sustainable regional development is based on a holistic vision that aims not only at the reconstruction of the urban environment but also at encouraging citizens to take an active role in managing space.

Today, the idea of sustainability goes beyond the purely environmental perspective and embraces a more human and cultural one. The cultural aspect of development is a key factor for the resilience of local communities, as their values, traditions and memories act as links of continuity and adaptation to new challenges (Mitoula, 2013). Dhers (2024) reminds us that natural ecosystems are almost always shaped by human practices and traditions. Therefore, including local cultures in biodiversity and landscape conservation strategies is vital for achieving nature-positive results. Local societies are not just passive recipients of sustainability policies; they are active contributors who, through the transmission of knowledge, local wisdom and their connection with the environment, ensure the continuity of both cultural and natural balance.

This same principle lies behind the “Cultural Routes” program of the Council of Europe (1987), which promotes sustainable cultural development as a way to strengthen European identity and intercultural dialogue (COE, 2022). According to its principles, Cultural Routes aim to recognise diversity, protect shared values, and empower local communities through participatory forms of cultural tourism. A similar vision is expressed in the ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism (2021), which emphasises that the protection of cultural heritage and community rights must stand at the centre of any cultural tourism policy or project. The Charter encourages collaboration among all stakeholders — public, regional, professional and social — within a people-centred, rights-based framework aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Mitoula and Kaldis (2013) argue that cultural routes can become effective tools for branding and local development, not only in cities but also in peripheral regions, provided that the promotion of the place is not limited to a tourist image but is based on authentic values and cultural narratives. Kokkosis and Tsartas (2001) had already pointed out that protecting the natural and cultural environment can be a real competitive advantage when it is fully integrated into tourism planning. Within this framework, cultural routes become multidimensional instruments of sustainable management, linking cultural memory, natural heritage and the traveller’s own experience.

Therefore, sustainability should not be seen only as a goal, but also as a starting point for creating cultural routes. A route is not just a touristic product; it is a dynamic mechanism that connects local knowledge with present-day practice, allowing cultural revitalisation and social cohesion to emerge through the active involvement of the community.

2. LITERARY TOURISM AND TRAVEL TEXTS AS A FOUNDATION FOR CULTURAL ROUTES

2.1. From sustainability to literary tourism

One of the most creative expressions of sustainability—beyond ecological balance or economic resilience—relates to the preservation and activation of cultural capital. This is

precisely where literary tourism finds its place. It is a form of cultural tourism that connects travel with literature and with the stories that have captured landscapes, experiences and human figures (Manola, 2019). Literary tourism allows visitors to perceive a place through the written word, to experience a destination not simply as a setting, but as a cultural text where traces of the past and the voices of authors meet the present moment. It is a gentle and reflective form of tourism, based on narration, memory and empathy rather than the consumption of space (Pérez-Martínez, 2022). In this sense, literary tourism becomes a bridge between cultural sustainability and local development, helping to form a more responsible, participatory and meaningful travel experience.

2.2. Literary tourism through travel writings

Literary tourism is closely linked with an older yet equally fruitful form of writing: the *travel text*. The narratives of travellers, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, provide first-hand testimonies of how places were perceived, described and interpreted by foreign visitors (Simopoulos, 2000; Viggopoulou, 2005). These texts are at once historical sources, literary works and records of cultural perception, revealing the gaze of the “other” upon the landscape, the people and their traditions. Such accounts can serve as tools that offer new ways of reading the landscape and that enhance sustainability by highlighting the uniqueness of local culture, functioning as early versions of travel guides (Tsatalmpasoglou et al., 2024; Tsatalmpasoglou, 2025).

In the case of Crete, travel writings act as *archives of memory*: they preserve information about urban form, monuments, agriculture, trade, and social life, as well as about the customs and habits of the inhabitants (Tsatalmpasoglou & Manola, 2024; Tsatalmpasoglou et al., 2025). The wealth of these texts—from Buondelmonti and Piacenza to Coronelli, Pococke and Tournefort—forms a multilayered record of the island that can support the creation of modern cultural routes combining knowledge, memory and experience.

Travel texts, therefore, can serve as the foundation for designing sustainable routes, as they connect the natural and cultural environment with the narrative tradition. Through reading, identifying place-names and interpreting the travellers’ descriptions, the researcher can retrace the “lines” of early journeys, locate points of interest and transform them into cultural stops. This approach enables the creation of routes with cultural depth and experiential character, where today’s traveller repeats—in another time and in a different way—the gaze of the early explorers.

3. CULTURAL ROUTES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Hiking trails represent one of the most successful tools of sustainable tourism development, as they combine soft tourist activity with the promotion of both the natural and cultural environment. Through the creation of organized paths, tourism can be decentralized, nature can be protected, and areas often left outside mass tourist flows can be reactivated. Hiking, as a form of slow and conscious travel, strengthens the interaction with the place, the understanding of the landscape and the appreciation of local heritage.

The development of an extended network of hiking routes could become a strategic initiative for enhancing sustainable tourism, linking natural landscapes with the historical and cultural features of each area. When designed in a participatory way and in cooperation with local actors, such initiatives can support the local economy, preserve cultural identity and create an authentic, experience-based tourism product.

At the same time, hiking routes can provide the foundation for developing cultural routes, which use traces of history, local narratives and travel writings as their narrative framework. In this way, the physical experience of walking is connected with memory and cultural

interpretation, creating a type of tourism that moves beyond the consumption of landscape and instead integrates knowledge and meaning.

A network of this kind — inspired by the references found in travel texts and in the literary representations of place — could transform the region's cultural capital into a resource for sustainable development. Adopting such an approach allows research and cultural heritage to be connected with strategic tourism planning, reinforcing community participation and destination resilience. The following section presents selected maps and excerpts from travel writings that could serve as the basis for a network of cultural routes in Lasithi, founded on the principles of sustainable tourism development.

4. THE CULTURAL ROUTES OF LASITHI: FROM THE TRAVELLERS' MEMORY TO THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

4.1 From the "Regno di Candia" to the Sitia Geopark: Landscape, Memory and Sustainability

The maps *Sito del Paleocastro di Settia* and *Città di Settia* by Francesco Basilicata (c. 1618–1620) depict with remarkable precision the coastal and mountainous geomorphology of eastern Crete, presenting Sitia as a place where nature, history and human presence exist in constant dialogue. The cartographer records the settlement of Palekastro, the salt pans, the castle and the harbour, revealing the dynamic relationship of the town with both its seafront and its hinterland.

The area represented by Basilicata is now included in the UNESCO Sitia Geopark, one of the most representative areas where geological heritage intersects with rich biodiversity, offering optimal conditions for cultural and nature-based excursions (notably the archaeological sites of Itanos, Roussolakkos and the Monastery of Toplou). The natural vegetation of the region¹ is mainly shrubby and phrygana-type, with clusters of trees along streams and gorges. The *Vai palm forest*, dominated by the Cretan date palm (*Phoenix theophrasti*), stands out, along with small groves of kermes oaks, plane trees and carobs. Within the NATURA 2000 network, the region includes coastal dunes with junipers, steppe and rocky ecosystems, as well as seasonal wetlands in Chiona, Ziros, Maridatis and Zakros—critical habitats for migratory birds and key biodiversity nodes along the Europe–Africa corridor.

Basilicata's cartographic testimony thus provides a valuable foundation for the contemporary interpretation of the landscape: from the maps of the seventeenth century to today's environmental protection programmes, the territory of Sitia maintains an unbroken thread of natural and cultural identity. Through the cultural and nature routes of the Geopark, the visitor can follow the traces of the old cartographers and travellers, experiencing a landscape that unites light, memory and sustainable development.

4.2. Ierapetra – Myrtos – Arvi – Viannos

The southern coast of eastern Crete was already depicted in the seventeenth century through the Venetian engravings of Francesco Basilicata's *Regno di Candia* (c. 1618–1620), republished in the edition *The Kingdom of Crete – Maps* (1994). On map XXVII, entitled *Spiaggia di Mirto*, the beach of Myrtos is represented together with the river flowing into the sea, the sailing vessels and the mountainous formations—an ensemble where cartography meets painting. Basilicata approaches the landscape as an organic system of nature, navigation and human presence, offering an early testimony to the relationship between space and lived experience.

¹ informations from the Siteia Geopark's website

Today, visitors can follow the course of the Myrtos river upstream towards its sources, along an idyllic route that passes through the scenic Sarakina Gorge, approximately 1.5 kilometres long.



Fig. 1 : The Myrtos Bay (Spiaggia di Mirto)
Resource: Vikelaia Municipal Library (1994 reprint)

Two centuries later, **Robert Pashley (1837)** followed the same southeastern route from Ierapetra to Viannos, giving new dimension to the same landscape. From the olive-covered villages of Myrtos and Sykologos to the valley of Arvi, Pashley combined physiographical observation with mythological recollection. As he writes, *“The road to Myrtos, after leaving the plain, passes through hills presenting points of view which are sometimes picturesque, and is never very far from the sea”* (Pashley 1837: 240). He also mentions the so-called *“Giant’s Tomb”*, noting that *“In much more ancient times we find legends of mythical personages, the belief in whose existence is perhaps still more likely to have given rise to the name of the place”* (ibid.: 243–244).

At Arvi, he describes the discovery of a marble sarcophagus: *“Near the shore at Arvi a monument of ancient art was discovered, broken in pieces by peasants who probably sought for gold within. Fragments of marble show parts of a horse and a young female head”* (ibid.: 247–248). Pashley identifies Viannos with ancient *Biennos*, connecting the area with the Giants Otos and Ephialtes, who, according to mythology, defied Zeus.

The juxtaposition of Basilicata’s cartographic vision and Pashley’s travel narrative reveals the continuity of the same landscape across centuries — from the Venetian imagery of the seventeenth century to the British scientific gaze of the nineteenth. The *Spiaggia di Mirto* is not merely a cartographic representation but a cultural document, attesting to the enduring allure of southeastern Lasithi as a place of memory, myth and travel.

Agia Fotia – Mylonas Gorge – Hiking in Thripti

The map *Spiaggia di Santa Lucia* by Francesco Basilicata (c. 1618–1620) depicts with remarkable accuracy the coastal zone east of Ierapetra, corresponding to what is today known as Agia Fotia. The names recorded by the cartographer — *Gaidouronisi, Peristera, Scaglio* — have remained almost unchanged until the present day, confirming the continuity of the region’s toponymic identity.



Fig.2: Basilicatas' Santa Lucia
Resource: Vikelaia Municipal Library

Peristera still designates the characteristic peninsula, while *Gaidouronisi* (today's Gaidouronissi or Chrysi Island) remains one of the most beautiful islands in the Mediterranean, famous for its cedar forest (*Juniperus macrocarpa*). The area is now protected as a fragile ecosystem: access is permitted only for swimming on designated beaches and overnight stay is strictly prohibited due to the pressure of overtourism.

Of particular interest is the small rocky islet marked on the map as *Scaglio*, identified with today's Daskaleio of Ierapetra. The name derives from the Italian *scoglio* (reef or rock islet) and seems to have frequently appeared in Venetian *isolari*²*Isola di Scaglio* — a term which, over time, evolved in Greek as *Daskaleio*. This linguistic transformation (*di Scaglio* → *Daskalio*) explains why dozens of small islets across Greece share the same name: they are linguistic remnants of the Venetian cartographic language.

Building upon this cartographic heritage, modern nature trails could be designed to connect the Mylonas Gorge — with its impressive waterfall — to the nearby Gorge of Agios Ioannis, which unfortunately suffered from wildfires last summer. In this way, visitors would have the chance to experience the Cretan landscape “through the eyes of the past”: walking along the same paths once painted by seventeenth-century cartographers and described with admiration by early travellers, rediscovering a unity of nature, history and memory.

²Nautical maps



Fig 3: View of the sea from Thrypti.
Source: personal collection.

The above observations and cartographic evidence served as a starting point for exploring how historical travel narratives can be integrated into the modern tourism development of the area. The next stage of the research focuses on visitors' attitudes towards the connection between literature, landscape and sustainable routes.

5. RESEARCH

5.1. Methodology

The empirical research was conducted during the last week of May and the first week of June 2025 in the region of Lasithi, Crete. The structure and formulation of the questionnaire followed established methodological principles for tourism research (Durberry, 2020), ensuring clarity, simplicity, and relevance to the objectives of the study.

The sample consisted of 108 adult visitors, all independent travellers (not part of organised groups) who had participated in hiking excursions within the area.

Participants voluntarily responded to the instrument included **25 items**, the majority being closed-ended questions, while two allowed for short written responses (country of origin and previous travel experience) designed to explore their perceptions of literary, cinematic, and travel-text-based tourism, as well as their attitudes towards sustainable and alternative tourism forms.

The questionnaire included five demographic questions (gender, country of origin, age, education level, and income) and twenty thematic questions divided into the following sections:

- Literary and Film-Induced Tourism: familiarity with places connected to authors, literary characters or adaptations; preferences between book-based and film-based representations of destinations.
- Travel Texts and Cultural Routes: interest in following routes inspired by historical travel writings; motivations for such participation (e.g., historical, cultural, or experiential reasons); willingness to combine these routes with other tourism forms such as hiking, gastronomic, religious or agritourism.
- Sustainability and Slow Tourism: perceptions of literary tourism as a form of sustainable and low-impact travel; views on the connection between cultural heritage and environmental responsibility.

- Experience and Intention: previous participation in hiking or cultural routes and willingness to recommend literary or travel-text routes to others.

The data collected aimed to identify visitors' level of awareness and interest in literary and travel-text tourism as sustainable practices that foster cultural identity, community engagement, and local development.

5.2 Results

The analysis of the demographic data shows that the sample consisted of 108 participants, with a slight predominance of women (49.1%) over men (30.6%), while 20.4% preferred not to declare their gender. Age distribution is mainly concentrated in the 31–45 age group (43.5%), with smaller groups aged 18–30 (21.3%) and 46–60 (20.4%), indicating that the research primarily addressed active travellers of middle age.

Regarding the level of education, the majority of respondents hold a university degree (31.5%) or a postgraduate qualification (25%), while 7.4% possess a doctoral degree. This finding suggests that the sample is characterised by a high level of educational capital — an element consistent with the nature of literary and cultural tourism, which tends to attract visitors with advanced cultural awareness and interest.

In terms of income, most participants (41.7%) belong to the €30,001–40,000 category, while 32.4% report an income of up to €30,000. This distribution indicates a middle-income group, with the economic capacity to choose thematic travel experiences that require a certain level of financial comfort.

As for country of origin, the sample is multicultural, with major groups from France (26.9%), Germany (24.1%) and the United Kingdom (11.1%), followed by respondents from Italy, the Scandinavian countries and the Benelux region. This geographical diversity reinforces the international dimension of the study and highlights the intercultural appeal of Crete as a destination.

When it comes to sources of inspiration for choosing a destination, most participants mention travel TV series (26.9%) and literary works (21.3%), while personal recommendations (21.3%) also play a significant role. This finding shows that visual storytelling (through television or online series) coexists with literary influence, confirming the contemporary interaction between literature, image and tourism.

The majority (78.7%) consider the combination of literature with other forms of tourism attractive, confirming the interdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon, while 70.4% state that they are very or highly willing to participate in cultural routes based on old travel texts. Furthermore, 51.9% believe that literature has a strong positive impact on the image of a destination, and 37% “quite a lot,” highlighting the powerful representational role of literary discourse.

Regarding motivations, the dominant factors are sustainability (39.8%) and cultural identity (29.6%), followed by interest in alternative tourism (13.9%). The emphasis on sustainability demonstrates the close link between literary experience and the principles of environmental and cultural responsibility.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study highlighted the importance of travel and literary texts as tools for cultural reconstruction and sustainable tourism development. The findings show that the audience attracted to such forms of tourism is characterized by a high level of education, cultural sensitivity and a positive attitude towards activities that link literature with the landscape. The strong willingness to participate in routes based on travel writings confirms the potential of literary tourism to serve as a practical means of sustainable engagement with cultural heritage.

At the same time, the research demonstrates that connecting the natural and cultural environment with travellers' narratives can serve as a starting point for creating a network of cultural routes, following the model of the Council of Europe. Such a network would strengthen the visibility of Crete as a destination of authentic experience, linking local identity with contemporary cultural interpretation and encouraging the active involvement of local communities. Within this framework, the importance of education and professional training of tourism professionals is also highlighted, as they are called upon to act as mediators between narrative, place, and the visitor, integrating cultural content into hospitality and guiding practices.

Finally, it becomes clear that strategic planning is essential. Integrating travel texts into cultural and tourism policies can open new perspectives for the sustainable development of Lasithi. The connection between research findings, cultural heritage and tourism practice allows for the formation of a coherent management framework — one that transforms memory into experience, narrative into identity, and tourism into a tool of cultural resilience.

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Links

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Appendix

Survey on Literary, Film-Induced and Sustainable Tourism in Lasithi, Crete

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Gender: Male Female Other / Prefer not to say
2. Country of origin: _____
3. Age: 18–30 31–45 46–60 61–70 71+
4. Education level: Secondary Higher University Postgraduate Doctorate
5. Annual income: <15,000€ 15,001–30,000€ 30,001–50,000€ 50,001–60,000€ >60,001€

Section B: Literary and Film-Induced Tourism

6. Have you ever visited a place related to the life of an author? Yes No
7. Have you ever visited a place mentioned in a literary work or connected with a literary character? Yes No
8. What most inspired your visit to a destination?
 A book A film A TRAVEL series FRIENDS Other
9. Which experience do you consider more authentic?
 Visiting a place linked to literature Visiting a place known from cinema
10. Do you believe that literature can positively influence a destination's image?
 Not at all Slightly Moderately Much Very much

Section C: Travel Texts and Cultural Routes

11. Would you be interested in following a modern cultural route based on an old travel text?
 Yes No Maybe
12. What would be your main motivation?
 Historical interest Cultural identity Contact with nature Alternative experience Sustainability
13. Would you be more likely to participate if the route were combined with another type of tourism?
 Yes No
14. If yes, which type would you prefer?
 Hiking tourism Gastronomic tourism Religious tourism Agrotourism Other _____
15. How important do you consider the inclusion of readings or literary excerpts during the route?
 Not at all Slightly Moderately Very Extremely

Section D: Sustainability and Alternative Tourism

16. Are you familiar with the term "sustainable tourism"? Yes No
17. Do you consider literary tourism a form of soft or alternative tourism?
 Not at all Slightly Moderately Very Extremely
18. Do you think such tourism forms help protect natural and cultural heritage?
 Yes, greatly Yes, to some extent Not much Not at all
19. Would you prefer activities that promote environmental respect, even if they are less "touristic"?
 Yes Maybe No
20. Would you support the inclusion of literary and travel-text routes in sustainable tourism

programmes?

- Definitely yes Yes, under conditions No

Section E: Experience and Intention

21. Have you ever participated in an organised cultural or hiking route? Yes No

22. If yes, where? _____

23. What do you consider the main value of such routes?

- Environmental awareness Cultural knowledge Social interaction

Recreation

24. Would you recommend a literary or travel-text route to others? Yes Maybe No

25. How would you describe your overall attitude towards literary tourism?

- Negative Neutral Positive Very positive